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ABSTRACT

This digest explores the concept of mentoring with gifted students and offers guidelines on its implementation. The literature on mentoring is reviewed, noting the maturing effect of mentor relationships and the particular value of mentors for disadvantaged students and for females. Among six guidelines offered are: decide what (not whom) the student needs, identify a few mentor candidates, and monitor the mentor relationship. Among questions to ask students are whether a student wants a mentor and whether the student is prepared to spend a significant amount of time with the mentor. Among questions to ask potential mentors are whether the mentor understands and likes working with children and adolescents and whether the mentor is willing to be a real role model. Includes 16 references. (DB)

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MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS AND GIFTED LEARNERS

If we want them to achieve, we must link them with achievers.... One plus one—Pass it on.

H. Weinberg, The Public Television Outreach Alliance

One of the most valuable experiences a gifted student can have is exposure to a mentor who is willing to share personal values, a particular interest, time, talents, and skills. When the experience is properly structured and the mentor is a good match for the student, the relationship can provide both mentor and student with encouragement, inspiration, new insights, and other personal rewards.

The idea of mentoring is as old as mankind. Ancient Greece introduced the concept, and it was institutionalized during the Middle Ages. The term *mentor* does not imply an internship, an apprenticeship, or a casual hit-or-miss relationship in which the student simply spends time in the presence of an adult and information is transmitted (Boston, 1979). Internships and apprenticeships are valuable because they allow students to learn new skills and investigate potential career interests. A mentorship, on the other hand, is a dynamic shared relationship in which values, attitudes, passions, and traditions are passed from one person to another and internalized. Its purpose is to transform lives (Boston, 1976).

Research and case studies focusing on mentors and mentorships often address the effects of the mentor in terms of career advancement, particularly for women (Kerr, 1983). The research emphasis on professional advancement and success takes priority over clarifying the basic characteristics of the relationship and its importance to gifted students (Kaufmann, Harrel, Milam, Woolverton, & Miller, 1986). Kaufmann's (1981) study of Presidential Scholars from 1964 to 1968 included questions pertaining to the nature, role, and influence of their most significant mentors. Having a role model, support, and encouragement were the most frequently stated benefits. Respondents also stated that they strongly benefited from mentors who set an example, offered intellectual stimulation, communicated excitement and joy in the learning process, and understood them and their needs.

Kaufmann's research also underscored the critical importance of mentors for gifted girls. The study, conducted 15 years after these students graduated from high school, indicated that when the earning powers of the women were equal to those of the men, the women had had one or more mentors. In other words, the presence of a mentor may equalize earning power.

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Mentor relationships with dedicated scholars, artists, scientists, or businesspeople are highly suitable for gifted adolescents, particularly those who have mastered the essentials of the high school curriculum. Many of these students have multiple potentials (they like everything and are good at everything) and may encounter college and career planning problems if they cannot establish priorities or set long-term goals (Berger, 1989; Frederickson & Rothney, 1972; Kerr, 1985). Such students may have more options and alternatives than they can realistically consider. Parents often notice that mentors have a maturing effect: Students suddenly develop a vision of what they can become, find a sense of direction, and focus their efforts. Some exemplary programs were described by Cox, Daniel, and Boston (1985) in *Educating Able Learners*.

Students from disadvantaged populations may also benefit strongly from mentor relationships (McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990). Mentor programs throughout the nation (e.g., Washington, DC, Chicago, IL, Austin, TX, and Denver, CO) match bright disadvantaged youngsters of all ages with professionals of all types. Student self-confidence and aspirations are raised to new heights as the relationship grows and develops. Young adolescents gain a sense of both the lifestyle associated with the mentor's profession and the educational course that leads to it. These relationships extend far beyond the boundaries of local schools, where they often start, as mentors become extended family members and, later, colleagues. Said one mentor, in a Public Broadcasting Service documentary film (James & Camp, 1989), "This is not just a business relationship. I specialize in [student's name]." The mentor, a renowned journalist who works with one student at a time and offers workshops in mentoring, went on to say, "We unlock the future. Our relationship is valuable at various stages of life and in different ways." The student responded, "I'm glad he's so critical [of my work]. A mentor sees things in you, things you may not have seen yourself."

A true mentor relationship does not formally end. In this instance, both parties were energized by the process and said that they have continued to learn from one another, growing personally and professionally. They thought of one another as colleagues, although the student, currently a journalist in a large city, still relies on her mentor when she needs advice on a news story. They communicate by fax machine. Each has made an indelible imprint upon the life of the other.

The following guidelines, adapted from *Gifted Children Monthly* (Kaufmann, 1988), may be useful to parents and educators who wish to explore mentor relationships for gifted youngsters.

Guidelines for Educators and Parents

- Identify what (not whom) a youngster needs. The student may want to learn a particular skill or subject or want someone to offer help in trying out a whole new lifestyle.
- Decide with the youngster whether he or she really wants a mentor. Some might just want a pal, advisor, or

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exposure to a career field, rather than a mentor relationship that entails close, prolonged contact and personal growth.

- Identify a few mentor candidates. If access to local resources is limited, long-distance mentors are an option. *Who's Who* directories and the *Encyclopedia of Associations* are rich sources of potential mentors.
- Interview the mentors. Find out whether they have enough time and interest to be real role models, whether their style of teaching would be compatible with the youngster's learning style, and whether they are excited about their work and want to share their skills. Be explicit about the student's abilities and needs and about the potential benefits the mentor might derive from working with the young person.
- Prepare the youngster for the mentorship. Make sure the youngster understands the purpose of the relationship, its benefits and limitations, and the rights and responsibilities that go along with it. Make sure you understand these things as well.
- Monitor the mentor relationship. If, after giving the mentorship a fair chance, you feel that the youngster is not identifying with the mentor, that self-esteem and self-confidence are not being fostered, that common goals are not developing, or that expectations on either side are unrealistic, it might be wise to renegotiate the experience with the youngster and the mentor. In extreme cases seek a new mentor.

Questions to Ask Students

- Does the student want a mentor? Or does the student simply want enrichment in the form of exposure to a particular subject or career field?
- What type of mentor does the student need?
- Is the student prepared to spend a significant amount of time with the mentor?
- Does the student understand the purpose, benefits, and limitations of the mentor relationship?

To identify mentor candidates, use your own circle of friends and their contacts, other parents of gifted students, local schools, local universities, businesses and agencies, professional associations, local arts groups, and organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons. State Governors' Schools and magnet high schools for gifted students are also potential sources of information on mentors and mentorship programs.

Questions to Ask Mentors

- Does the mentor understand and like working with gifted youngsters and adolescents?
- Is the mentor's teaching style compatible with the student's learning style?
- Is the mentor willing to be a real role model, sharing the excitement and joy of learning?
- Is the mentor optimistic, with a "sense of tomorrow"?

Cox and Daniel (1983) and Cox, Daniel, and Boston (1985) have provided useful guidelines for establishing mentor programs.

For more information, contact Gray and Associates, in care of the International Centre for Mentoring, 4042 West 27th Avenue, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6S 1R7. If you want to become a mentor, call your local volunteer coordinating agencies or clearinghouses such as United Way.

One plus one — Pass it on.

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